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US leak-plugging effort turns inward

Wealth of secrets, ideologues pose a daunting task

By Walter V. Robinson
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WASHINGTON – When William J. Casey, the director of central intelligence, called last month for the prosecution of five news organizations for reporting details about intercepted Libyan communications, he urged no such action against some of the officials who leaked the information in the first place.

Those officials, as it turned out, included high-ranking government officials to whom Casey himself reports.

Indeed, in the view of some officials, the most public disclosure of highly classified communications intelligence evidence of Libyan complicity in the terrorist bombing of a West Berlin discotheque was made by President Reagan himself, in an April 14 television address seen by tens of millions of Americans.

"The evidence is now conclusive that the terrorist bombing . . . was planned and executed under the direct orders of the Libyan regime," the president declared. Then he, like some of his aides had already done privately, launched into a description of messages that could have come only from intercepted communications. He added, "Our evidence is direct. It is precise. It is irrefutable."

As president, however, Reagan, has the right to divulge even the most sensitive classified information. But that privilege does not extend to his aides.

"By definition, a president can't leak. He declassifies," said Stephen Hess, a Brookings Institution scholar who has studied the issue. As for other high officials, Hess remarked, "At the top, they don't leak information. They plant it."

Since he made those threats last month, Casey has threatened prosecution of several news organizations for disclosing details of the classified intelligence that Ronald W. Pelton, the former intelligence analyst, was convicted last Thursday of selling to the Soviet Union.

But White House officials have been critical of Casey's tactics, while the Justice Department has resisted taking such action. And the White House, chief of staff, Donald T. Regan, indicated in an interview on Friday that the Reagan administration is much more interested in going after government officials involved in the unauthorized leaking of classified information than in prosecuting news organizations that receive it.

Referring to the unauthorized leakers, Regan declared, "I think in that particular case, all of those should be investigated. And if it's found out who did it, that that be a case that be prosecuted."

As for the press, he added, "I don't think we can have a hard and fast policy that every damn time that happens, we prosecute. But on the other hand, I don't think we should say we'll never prosecute."

However, Regan said punitive action should not be limited to disclosure of classified information. He expressed anger as well at what he called "embarrassing or disconcerting" leaks about unclassified but politically sensitive internal matters, including "domestic policies or procedures or decisions that the president may have made but we're not prepared to announce."

He added: "And the person responsible, if it's deliberate and if it's repetitive, that person should be fired, because these are unauthorized disclosures."

Whatever tack is taken in stemming the torrent of classified secrets, the problem is daunting. And Hess attributes much of it to the amount of classified information that exists and to the number of people who have access to it.

By government estimates, more than 4 million Americans – or about one in every 60 persons in the United States – have access to US government secrets of one kind or another. About 1.5 million of those work for companies holding government contracts.

And an astonishing number of people – somewhere between 125,000 and 185,000, no one is quite sure of the number – have clearances that allow them access to the highly sensitive, top secret intelligence, including communications intelligence, of the type that Pelton was convicted of having sold to the Soviets.

What's more, Hess noted, about 20 million new federal documents are classified every year, with 350,000 of those classified as top secret or higher. In 1982, Hess recalled, he discovered that the State Department even classifies some clippings from foreign newspapers.

Because of these numbers, the potential for unauthorized disclosures of classified information is enormous. And in the Reagan administration, by the estimate of Hess and others, the problem is compounded by the large number of ideologues who hold appointed positions.

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Many middle-level political appointees in the Reagan administration, he said, "have a very high ideological quotient. They are true believers who fight their battles by trying to influence public opinion. And one way they do that is to leak information to the press."

Such motivations were cited in two recent cases, in which Pentagon and State Department political appointees were fired for disclosing classified information. In one case, a State Department speechwriter, Spencer C. Warren, a conservative appointee, admitted that he had leaked a top secret diplomatic cable suggesting that House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. was undermining Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua.

More troublesome to intelligence officials, in some respects, is the disclosure of sensitive information by more senior officials intent on buttressing support for administration policy.

That was evidently the case with the disclosure of the intercepted Libyan communications, which was displayed publicly to create support for the bombing raid announced by Reagan in his April 14 address to the nation.

Other such instances, each potentially damaging in its own way to national security, have occurred with some frequency during Reagan's presidency. Just last month, for instance, Secretary of State George P. Shultz told White House reporters during an on-the-record briefing in Tokyo that the United States had detailed knowledge of the scene around the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster site, in the process making an obvious reference to intelligence gathered under the highly secret US satellite reconnaissance program.

In 1983, after Soviet fighters shot down a South Korean airliner that had overflown Soviet airspace, killing 269 persons, Shultz disclosed that the United States had intercepted the messages between the Soviet pilots and their base. The year before, the United States made public top-secret reconnaissance photos taken over Central America, with the goal of providing public evidence of the growth in the size of the Nicaraguan armed forces.

WILLIAM J. CASEY
Threatening the media

Even Casey is not averse to disclosing highly classified intelligence. Last year, after a Soviet defector from the KGB, Vitaly S. Yurchenko, returned to the Soviet Union, the White House sought to portray Yurchenko's information as virtualilly worthless to the United States.

Casey, in a public rebuttal, authorized his subordinates at the CIA to brief reporters on the wealth of top secret information that Yurchenko had provided during CIA debriefings.